

Bringing the entire community together for student success

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When Dr. Blanca Cavazos, superintendent of Taft Union High School District is asked about her leadership style, she cannot answer in the singular. To her, the concept can only be thought of as a communal activity.

"It is truly a team effort here," she says. "We have leaders everywhere. It is not about one person."

Still, after six years in charge, Cavazos has instilled within the district staff a full commitment to preparing students to either enter college or the work force based on the foundation that attendance matters.

And toward that end, she is bringing a sophisticated, data-driven campaign to campus aimed at reducing chronic absenteeism that has remained stubbornly high at 12 percent.

"We've been talking about this with the staff for at least the last year," she says. "I think it is important that we all appreciate how important attendance is, and we've spent a lot of time on it—right down to how to take accurate attendance."

Key to the new effort is a web-based early warning and intervention system powered by the Achievement Initiative called Attention2Attendance (A2A), developed by School Innovations & Achievement (SI&A). The software tracks student attendance, providing a dashboard interface accessible by multiple users. The program also automates letters home before student truancy becomes a bigger problem.

"We are a small district and we have fewer hands to do a lot of work," she explains. "A2A helps us keep on top of things and get the information parents need as quickly as possible."



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"We know that the more time that passes between when a student is absent and when it is brought to the parent's attention, the less likely a correction will be made," she said.

That said, Cavazos says the problems of chronic absenteeism and truancy are not just for the district and the parents to deal with.

She notes the students in her district are all in high school, and thus, bear some responsibility for their actions. The community at large, she said, is also a key stakeholder.

"Attendance is important to every single person in the community," she says. "The students are directly affected and the parents, secondarily. But every single resident of our community is also affected. We all lose when they are not getting the rich education being provided."

The downward spiral is well supported by research: students that miss class have trouble catching up and are prone to disengagement and dropout. "When a student leaves school altogether, we have a person that might have had the capability to be a high-wage earner, who isn't," she says.

Susan Cook, COO and Leadership Coach at SI&A, said recognizing the role played by the outside community on school attendance is critical for districts to succeed.

"We very purposely built into the A2A service a parent and community engagement component because of its importance," she said. "It is something that we typically have to bring to the attention of the district, but here Dr. Cavazos already has an appreciation of this dynamic."